

*Jean (Kresy) Dillenger
* Black Women Organized for Action
* by phone, 28 October 1997

[It was a difficult interview to get and then she didn't remember much. Tape has background buzzing noise.]

K: ---with the school system?

J: No, I was with the---I was Deputy Regional Director for the Office of Civil Rights in San Francisco, but I was with the Federal Government.

K: Okay. I'll get started with the interview. I realize you said you don't remember a lot of things, so these questions are sort of general. But I also want you to be aware that I have done some research, so I'm just sort of playing dumb for the benefit of getting information from you. So the first thing I wanted to ask was if you remember how long you participated with Black Women Organized for Action?

J: Oh, let's see. I wouldn't know. I don't remember. I would guess it would be about five years.

K: Do you remember how you came to be involved with the organization?

J: Yeah, it was through a friend, who's also retired here in fact, and---although she wasn't retired then, you know. This was in the early '70s and I guess it went through---I guess it went through the '70s.

K: Okay, do you recall which friend it was?

J: Yeah, her name was Shirley Cohen was the one who introduced me to some of the other women who later became friends.

K: And do you remember how she presented it to you---to join the organization?

J: Well, it wasn't---I don't think it was really an organization when I started talking to this group of Black women. It was, "We ought to be doing something." And I think if I recall correctly, she said, "You know, there's this group of Black women and we've been talking and why don't you join us?" That kind of thing.

K: What do you think it was that they thought they ought to be doing?

J: I think---well, of course, this was right in the '70s women's awareness cycle and I think they were trying to find issues that were endemic to Black women and they wanted to support those. Perhaps, but not necessarily for political purposes, you know, getting the right people elected. Although there was another organization that later came along called "Black Women Organized for Political Action". And we did meet with them at times and we exchanged ideas and we also exchanged meeting times. So there was a lot of people in BWOA that were also in BWOPA. "Ba-wop-a" as we used to say.

K: And was that located over in the East Bay?

J: Right. BWOPA was primarily in the East Bay. What I think that really meant was, in terms of BWOA, it was Aileen Hernandez who had the place that we could go to. And then it was someone else---it was really location. I lived in the East Bay at that time and there were just as many people, I think, in the East Bay as there were in San Francisco, but you work---political lines, political boundaries are pretty fluid. People move back and forth. The house next door is in another city. Literally. It's in Kensington, I'm in El Cerrito.

K: So you have different zip codes and all that?

J: I don't know what their zip code is [laughter].

K: It's a different city entirely.

J: They're small cities. Are you familiar with Massachusettes? You go from one city to another. You never know you're in the next town.

K: Okay. So what role do you recall playing in BWOA? [pause] Did you ever serve on the steering committee of three people?

J: I think so. I'm not sure. I can't remember anything. I think I did, but I can't remember specifics about that.

K: Okay. Did you belong to any other organizations before you joined BWOA?

J: Well, I don't think they were organizations---yeah, I belonged to a lot of organizations over the years and I'm not sure---I was on the board of advocates for women. And I am not sure whether I was on the board before then or after then, but I think it was before BWOA.

K: And what did they do?

J: Actually we were administering programs to get women into non-traditional jobs at that time. Women carpenters, any construction, or hard labor jobs. Even things like telephone installation didn't have any women. And we did have a grant from the labor department [look up program?] to set up this apprenticeship program for women in various kinds of non-traditional jobs.

K: Were you a member of any civil rights organizations or Black liberation groups?

J: I don't think so. I was an investigator for the office of civil rights.

K: And what larger branch is that under?

J: Department of Education.

K: I didn't know if it was Department of Justice.

J: No, it was the Department of Education. We had jurisdiction over all---anybody who had any educational money, which was everybody.

K: Right.

J: Initially I concentrated in higher ed. In colleges and universities, although later I was director of the elementary and secondary programs.

K: What events stand out for you from the time you were with BWOA? Do you remember any particular campaigns you participated in or any fundraisers or things like that?

J: Not specifically. We were always busy doing something, but I don't remember the---I guess I don't have that good of memory. The image I have was that it was a very supportive group. When somebody had an idea and wanted to do something and showed some inclination to get it done, there was a lot of support there and we would help. I don't think any of the ideas were mine because I don't remember spearheading anything, but I do remember having a very positive feeling about a lot of Black women doing things that needed to be done. We had---I remember there was one young woman, who is a doctor now, who was just going to medical school. There were all kinds of ---I think it was a fundraiser for her and things like that.

K: Okay. So you felt like it was more of a supportive---would you say it was more of a supportive group to you or political or a mix of both of those?

J: I'd say it was political. I enjoyed supporting--- I'd say it was more supportive, but there were some political issues that we took up---worked on campaigns though I can't remember any of them.

K: Do you recall any ideological disputes? Like anything over what the focus of the group should be or political discussions?

J: Well, we didn't always agree, but what I do recall is we were always supportive of somebody's---maybe even scatterbrained---idea. And, you know, if you didn't want to support it, well, you didn't have to. But nobody ever, that I recall, ever really put it down. Having been in other groups, like I was on the board of the co-op---the Berkeley Co-op, which was then the biggest cooperative in the United States and which no longer exists now---but that group was so factionalized. I mean, you couldn't say "good morning" or "good evening" to a member of the opposite---you know. BWOA was not like that.

K: So people sort of accepted the political differences?

J: I thought so. Now maybe I just didn't know what was going on.

K: Do you have any recollection of how BWOA was viewed by other organizations?

J: No. No because---well, some of the women that were in Advocates for Women were also---they were also in BWOA and as far as them---and I still see some of them and they still remember it fondly. don't have any notes or stuff that I can periodically go back and look at.

K: Did you recall the pages that I sent you [She was noted as the author of a set of rules and a poem about paying dues]? Did you recall writing those?

J: Oh, god. Yeah. I was embarrassed. God, that was some awful, awful stuff.

K: [laughter] I thought they were very good.

J: [laughter] It was bad.

K: They really reflect the time, I thought. Let's see---

J: Yeah, I remember writing that. There was a sub-group of BWOA that was called Sapphire and we published that little book. All of the people in Sapphire were in BWOA.

K: So could anybody who was in BWOA be part of Sapphire or was it just a specific---

J: No, that was a specific group. Anybody could be part of BWOA, but Sapphire was a very specific, small group.

K: Do you recall who was part of that group?

J: Jackie Bradford, Naomi Gray, Aileen Hernandez, Patsy Fulcher, Eleanor Spikes---Patsy and Eleanor are deceased now. I think Jessica somebody. I can't remember Jessica's last name. And Anne. A woman named Anne. I can't remember her last name. If you had a name I can tell you whether that's right or not. *

K: Anne Chirenta?

J: Anne Chirenta? Oh, Anne Chirenta. There's another Anne, I think. Anne Chirenta was in there briefly and Anne dropped out.

K: Out of Sapphire?

J: I think she sort of dropped out of everything.

K: What about Anne Walls?

J: No. Spell it.

K: W-a-l-l-s?

J: No, that's not her name. Somebody did send me---keep talking. I'm going to go downstairs. Do you have a copy of Sapphire?

K: Of the book?

J: Yeah, the book.

K: Right. Ms. Hernandez sent me a copy actually. Oh, so there's probably a list.

J: Somebody sent me a copy when they found out mine had burned up. You know that big fire that was in Oakland? That was five years ago. And so I don't have---I had a whole bunch of stuff. Did you find anything in the back of that?

K: [looking] I don't see any names in here.

J: Well, I can get the names for you when I find the book and just call you.

K: Okay, that would be great. So, Sapphire published the *Seventy Soul Secrets of Sapphire* and were there any other publications?

J: Yeah, she published another one. I'd have to---Aileen knows it. Any of the Sapphires might remember it because I don't have a copy of that, but if it's of any use I can find out what the name of it was. I mean, it's not that hard to do.

K: Okay. I can look it up. Okay, so overall, what do you think BWOA accomplished?

J: Let's see. In the big scheme of things, I don't know ["political"?]. For a lot of Black women it provided an opportunity to get to know and respect and be proud of other Black women. And I think that was a positive. Anytime you can get with a group that is working and doing something and you can identify with that, I think that's a positive. I think for a lot of Black women, they thought there issues were different from the mainstream issues of the women's movement and so, you know, that was helpful.

K: Did you leave the organization or did it fold?

J: I think it [long pause]---you know, the organization was like a catapult, I think, for a lot of women. It gave them a jumping off spot and as women jumped off and got into bigger and, not necessarily more important, but bigger things the organization lost its leadership core. People got very, very busy with other things and moved away and as the leadership core declined nobody took it over. What question was I responding to?

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K: If the organization folded or if you left the organization.

J: It's hard to say which came first. Again, it was like a catapult for a lot of women who said, "Oh, I can do this." And there are people out there who want to do things and whatever it was---the particular thing that they wanted to do. And so they got busy. Many went onto other jobs or careers or left the area.

I've talked to Aileen a couple of times and we've always said, "Well, we've got to get together and have a reunion." And according to Aileen, she's had a lot of requests to get together and I told her that I would be

happy to send out a letter. I know she's much busier than I am. You know what? We've never done it. We've just never done it.

I think maybe there was a time when a person didn't call a meeting that should have. And so---because they were too busy or for whatever reason and then from then on nobody stepped in to fill the breach. So you didn't get a notice that there was a meeting, so you thought about it. For me it formed a lot of friendships. There are people---well, I'll give you one example is after I retired I started an investment club. This is not just Black women that---they're all colors. And they're not just women. There are men and Asians and Blacks and partners and gays and whatever. But a couple of those people are people from BWOA.

K: So you at least kept in touch.

J: And they're not the only ones. We have a group that we meet for dinner every six weeks or so and there are still two or three people in that group from BWOA. Occasionally, I run into Naomi Gray or one of the other participants.

K: So it continues on in that way.

J: Yeah, and I'm sure there are other little alliances that were formed. People who knew each other in BWOA and still have regular contact.

K: Okay. Is there anything that you would like to add that I haven't asked about?

J: No.

K: Well, thanks for you time.

J: [Apologizes for not remembering more and promises to get names of people in Sapphire. She later called with names. Expressed interest in seeing future articles.]